Small Islands Big Issues

A Plan for Small Islands: Highlights from the Programme of Action

At the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, Governments will adopt a Programme of Action that will make recommendations in 15 key areas. The main problems faced by small island countries and the proposals being considered for inclusion in the Programme of Action are outlined below.

1 Climate Change and Sea-Level Rise

The problem: Any rise in sea levels—as predicted to result from global climate change—will have "significant and profound effects" on the economies of small islands, says the action programme. "The very survival of certain low-lying countries would be threatened." Other possible effects of climate change would include damage to coral reefs and fisheries, increased frequency and intensity of storms and intrusion of salt water into freshwater supplies.

According to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), climate models indicate that, because of the greenhouse effect, the Earth's average surface temperature may increase by 1.5° to 4.5° C over the next 100 years. This warming would cause the sea to rise in two ways: through thermal expansion of ocean water and through the shrinking of polar ice caps and glaciers. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that, if no specific measures are taken to abate greenhouse-gas emissions, these two factors are likely to cause the sea to rise by around 65 cm from current levels by the year 2100.

The Framework Convention on Climate Change, which was opened for signature at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and which became legally binding in March 1994, is the main international instrument for controlling climate change. The Convention calls for developed country Parties (i.e., those that have ratified it) to take measures aimed at returning their emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases to 1990 levels by the year 2000. The adequacy of this and other commitments will be reviewed at the first session of the Conference of Parties, scheduled for March 1995 in Berlin.

Action proposals: The Programme of Action states that the provisions under the Framework Convention on Climate Change should be considered "inadequate"and that further action should be taken at the first meeting of the Conference of Parties effectively to address the problem of global climate change.

Other recommendations focus on assisting small islands to monitor and predict sea-level rise and to develop strategies for how they can best adapt if such changes occur.

2 Natural and Environmental Disasters

The problem: At least 13 of the 25 most disaster-prone countries are small island developing States. Islands frequently suffer extensive damage and loss of life from cyclones and hurricanes—which are more intense in tropical zones and over small land masses—as well as from volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.

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The impact of natural disasters is particularly devastating on small-scale island economies, according to information from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). In Tonga, Hurricane Isaac destroyed 50 per cent of housing and 90 per cent of the banana crop, the primary export commodity, in 1982. Hurricanes left 75 per cent of the people of Dominica homeless in 1980. The economic damage caused by an average disaster can run as high as 58 per cent of GNP (as it did in Vanuatu, which had four such disasters during the period 1980-1990). Commercial insurers are often unwilling to provide coverage for high-risk areas, which then impedes private investment in the country.

Action proposals: National and regional plans, with international assistance, should aim to improve disaster preparedness and early warning systems, and encourage development of disaster recovery plans. National and regional disaster emergency funds should be established, with joint public- and private-sector support, to assist in recovery efforts, especially in areas where insurance is not available on the commercial market.

3 Waste Management

The problem: Disposing of garbage and sewage is particularly difficult for small islands. Increasing amounts of waste, resulting from growing consumption and urbanization, have frequently led to pollution of lagoons and oceans, and contamination of groundwater. Limited land areas make the option of landfill unsustainable in the long term.

The disposal of toxic, hazardous or radioactive waste by other countries on small islands has also generated much concern. Their isolation and dependence on marine and land resources make small islands highly vulnerable to contamination. Many islands have expressed concern about possible damage by foreign ships carrying toxic and radioactive materials through their seas. There is no agreement as to whether reference to this should be made in the action programme.

Action proposals: National and regional measures, with international support, should be taken to encourage imports and local products that are biodegradable or low-waste, set up regulatory measures and pollution standards as part of waste management plans, implement international legal conventions governing shipments of hazardous waste and ocean dumping, build port facilities to collect waste from ships, and introduce cleaner technologies.

4 Coastal and Marine Resources

The problem: Most small island countries are highly dependent on their coastal and marine resources—on fish, for food and export income, and on healthy and unpolluted reefs, lagoons and beaches to sustain ecosystems and attract tourism. But increasing development, especially for tourism, threatens the very natural resources on which islands depend. Overexploitation and destructive fishing practices by local and foreign fishing fleets are reducing fish catches. Yet most island Governments lack the funds and technology to assess and monitor these valuable resources, the first step toward sustainable management.

Action proposals: Recommendations include development of national integrated coastal zone management plans, monitoring programmes and fisheries policies; strengthening of regional fisheries organizations and information-sharing; and negotiation of mutually advantageous fishing agreements between small islands and foreign fishing groups. The concerns of small islands should also be reflected in the negotiations on high-seas fishing being held by the UN Conference on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, which will conclude in August 1994.

5 Freshwater

The problem: Many small islands face severe constraints on both the quality and the quantity of freshwater, which set tight limits on sustainable development and cause health hazards. This is particularly the case for low-lying coral-based islands where groundwater supplies are limited and are protected only by a thin permeable soil. Even where rainfall is abundant, access to clean water has been restricted by inadequate storage and delivery systems.

In island urban areas, growing population size and per capita use are outpacing water supplies. Certain island industries, such as tourism and canning, are profligate consumers of freshwater. Water supplies are contaminated by untreated human, livestock and industrial waste,

and will be further threatened if, as predicted, sea level rises and salt water intrudes into groundwater supplies.

Action proposals: Small islands should develop integrated national water plans, including measures to build, maintain and protect watershed areas, irrigation systems and water distribution and collection networks and to promote water conservation and pollution prevention. Islands should improve their capacity to assess water supplies, and develop or acquire appropriate technologies and training for sewage disposal, desalination and rainwater collection. Regional and international partners should provide technical assistance and improve access by islands to environmentally clean technologies.

6 Land Resources

The problem: The small size of many islands creates intense competition for land, whether for towns and cities, agriculture, commercial forestry, tourism or mining. Contributing to the problem are population growth and land tenure systems.

A major long-term management issue for small islands is degradation of land because of overuse, deforestation or the effects of natural disasters. Also, the search for an improved quality of life, accompanied by growing demands for cash income, has encouraged greater production of cash crops for export. This in turn has led to increases in the size of cultivated areas and the use of more mechanized forms of agriculture which rely on environmentally harmful agrochemicals.

Action proposals: Small islands should formulate comprehensive land-use plans and regulations and economic incentives to promote sustainable land use, improve land-tenure and administration systems and support reforestation programmes, with regional and international cooperation.

7 Energy

The problem: Most small islands are heavily dependent on imported oil for transport and electricity generation, with energy often accounting for more than 12 per cent of imports. They also rely heavily on local fuelwood and other biomass for cooking. Current use of fuel tends to be very inefficient, with negative economic and environmental consequences.

The large-scale commercial use of renewable energy, such as solar or wind power, is limited by lack of appropriate technologies, investment capital and knowledge.

Action proposals: Small islands should promote energy conservation and efficiency with appropriate incentives and strengthen research on renewable energy, with regional and international support. Recommendations requesting industrialized countries and international institutions to assist island countries in acquiring clean and renewable energy technologies at reduced cost have proven controversial and have yet to be finalized.

8 Tourism

The problem: Tourism is a main source of revenue for many small islands—one of the few development options they have—but its impact on island environments and indigenous cultures threatens to ruin the very beauty and diversity that draws tourists. As an industry, tourism is both resource-intensive (high consumption of water, land and capital) and waste-intensive, affecting coastal ecosystems.

Action proposals: It is imperative that small islands carefully plan tourism development. This should include balancing development with other needs for land and coastal resources; requiring environmental impact assessments for all projects; developing guidelines for design and construction of tourist facilities to minimize environmental impact; and adopting measures to protect the cultural integrity of island peoples. Regional cooperative efforts should aim to harmonize industry standards and improve marketing and packaging of tours.

9 Biodiversity

The problem: Small islands are renowned for the diversity and uniqueness of their plant and animal species, but because of the small size, isolation and fragility of island ecosystems, their biological diversity is among the most threatened in the world. Deforestation, coral reef deterioration and the introduction of non-indigenous species are the most significant causes.

Because both land and marine resources are often communally owned, conservation efforts will need actively to involve the local community.

Action proposals: Small islands should develop integrated strategies to conserve biodiversity, promote community support for those efforts, and ratify the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Nationally and regionally, small islands should keep buffer stocks or gene banks of endangered species and improve research, species inventories and information exchange on biological resources, including biotechnology.

The international community should provide improved access to financial and technical resources that small islands need to pursue conservation and research efforts, as well as access to environmentally sound biotechnology. Countries worldwide should make greater use of import restrictions under the CITES Convention, and support strategies to protect small islands from the introduction of non-indigenous species.

10 National Institutions

The problem: Small island Governments often lack the administrative resources needed to pursue sustainable development, and, as with many countries, the way government ministries or departments are structured does not encourage integrated planning and management of resources.

Action proposals: Small islands need to strengthen their government institutions and administrative capacity, especially their environmental agencies, and improve the awareness and involvement of community groups. National and local governments should develop and enforce appropriate environmental regulations. Donor countries should improve access to the financial and technical assistance and training that islands may need to strengthen their national institutions.

With support from the international community, small islands should develop a Small Island Developing States Information Network (SIDS/NET) to facilitate the exchange of experience among islands.

11 Regional Institutions and Technical Cooperation

The problem: The limited human resources of small island States and their geographic isolation make regional cooperation especially important.

Action proposals: On a regional basis, a Small Island Developing States Technical Assistance Programme (SIDS/TAP) should be developed. Regional sustainable development centres should be established to promote research and training. Model environmental guidelines and environmental law training manuals should be drafted by regional institutions for adaptation by national officials. The international community should support these regional efforts.

12 Transport and Communication

The problem: Transport and communication are the lifelines linking small island States with the outside world, but distance and isolation have resulted in high transport costs and limited options for many islands, especially for many rural and outer-island communities. The quality and frequency of international shipping and air services is largely beyond national control.

Action proposals: With international support, small islands should continue to upgrade transport and communication services, with particular attention to environmental protection, safety and innovative low-cost solutions. Regional cooperation should be strengthened, including possibilities for consolidating national airline services to avoid fragmenting regional markets. Quarantine services need to be improved nationally and regionally.

The international community should help develop innovative, energy-efficient transport to move people and cargo to and from island ports without the need to build high-cost infrastructure. A proposal that developed countries should promote arrangements to lower international telecommunications costs to small island States has yet to be agreed on.

13 Science and Technology

The problem: Greater scientific and technical capacity and training are needed in small island States, particularly for developing and maintain-

ing new environmentally sound technologies. At the same time, traditional indigenous knowledge is increasingly dominated by modern science and technology, and needs to be better integrated.

Action proposals: Small island States should promote research and development, particularly in areas where local technologies and traditional practices have great relevance, and encourage the use of environmentally friendly technologies through regulations and economic incentives. Regional databases, especially ocean sciences networks, could be of assistance.

The international community should facilitate access to environmentally sound technologies, using, among other strategies, joint ventures and multilateral financial mechanisms. It should fully involve scientists from small island States in marine scientific research, and take account of island needs in various United Nations scientific programmes.

14 Human Resource Development

The problem: Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development, and thus attention must be given to enhancing the quality of human life in small island societies. Poor health services, nutrition and housing, low levels of female participation in development, high population densities and growth, and weak social services indicate a need for attention to human resources.

Action proposals: With regional and international support, small islands should improve basic services to urban and rural settlements, including family planning and health services, and work to eliminate poverty. They should strengthen the role of civil society, including non-governmental organizations and women, and improve education and training, particularly for environmental management.

15 Implementation, Monitoring and Review

At the close of the final pre-Conference negotiating session, Governments had yet to agree on most of this crucial chapter, which will focus on the financing and other elements needed to put the programme into action. Among the areas on which they seek agreement are:

- Whether international financing for sustainable development programmes should be "new and additional" or derived from better use of existing resources;
- Whether a specific funding mechanism should be named to channel financial assistance;
- To what extent the international community should provide financial and technical assistance on concessional terms;
- How the international community should assist small islands in improving their terms of trade in international commodity markets and in diversifying their exports;
- How the international community should facilitate access to environmentally sound technologies, and how to take into account the intellectual property rights (patents and copyrights) of the owners of the technologies (usually corporations in the industrialized countries);
- Whether a "vulnerability index" being developed by small island States should be used to supplement more traditional statistics such as per capita GDP, and how such an index should be developed and used;
- Whether the UN Development Programme (UNDP) should be responsible for coordinating a feasibility study of SIDS/NET (Small Island Developing States Information Network);
- How to support the development of national environmental legislation in small island States, as well as their participation in international legal arrangements;
- Whether the UN Department of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development should establish a focal point to coordinate implementation of the Programme of Action;
- The roles of UNCTAD, UNDP and UNEP in implementing the Programme of Action;
- Whether there should be a second Global Conference within the next five years; and
- When and how the outcome of the Global Conference should be reviewed by the Commission on Sustainable Development.

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